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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 002347

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TAGS: [IS](#) [KPKO](#) [LE](#) [MOPS](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: MGLE01: HIZBALLAH ABDUCTION OF TWO IDF SOLDIERS
RESULTS IN SERIOUS BLUE LINE FIGHTING

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) According to local UN officials, a day of heavy fighting in southern Lebanon began at approximately 0900 local when an undetermined number of rockets launched from southern Lebanon landed the area of Shlomi, Israel, injuring at least four Israeli civilians. Nearly simultaneously, fighting erupted along the western Blue Line near Rmaich, during which Hizballah claimed to have abducted two Israeli soldiers. In retaliation, Israeli aircraft struck infrastructure targets across southern Lebanon, including two bridges and numerous Hizballah positions. The artillery and airstrikes continue. UNIFIL could not confirm press reports of an "Israeli ground invasion" and at a 1700 news conference, Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah chided the media for exaggerated reporting of an Israeli incursion. UNIFIL has not observed Israeli ground forces in Lebanon, save for a single tank that subsequently hit a landmine at the Blue Line. As of 1600 local, Israel had not contacted UNIFIL to mediate a cease-fire, but Hizballah had sent some feelers to the senior UN envoy in Lebanon. End summary.

SIMULTANEOUS ROCKET STRIKE ON
SHLOMI; ABDUCTION NEAR RMAICH

12. (C) Throughout July 12, emboff contacted UN Political Officer Georges Nasr (located in Beirut) and UNIFIL Civil Affairs Officer Ryzscard Morzcynksi (located in Naqoura, near the Blue Line) for briefings on the fighting in southern Lebanon. According to these officials, the fighting began at 0905 local when unknown elements fired rockets from southern Lebanon, which landed in the vicinity of Shlomi, Israel. Israeli press reported that four to eight Israeli civilians were wounded in this rocket barrage. Almost simultaneously, UNIFIL observers reported small arms fire in the western sector of the Blue Line, near Rmaich. About an hour later, Hizballah announced on Al Manar television that it had captured two Israeli soldiers and was moving them to "a safe place." The Hizballah statement said it abducted the soldiers specifically to be used as bargaining chips to free Arab prisoners in Israeli jails.

13. (C) Since approximately 1000 local, Israeli aircraft have been conducting airstrikes on military and some infrastructure targets across southern Lebanon. According to the UN, several bridges have been hit. UNIFIL, as well as Arabic and Lebanese television stations, have reported that the February 6 bridge, the principal bridge over the Litani

River between Tyre and Nabatiyeh, has been destroyed, as well as the Kasmea coastal highway bridge located between Sidon and Tyre. Lebanese media also reported that three Lebanese civilians were killed in the airstrike on the bridge. UNIFIL could not confirm casualty figures on either side. (Other press reports say that as many as seven Israeli soldiers have been killed in the fighting.) UNIFIL reported earlier in the day that an Israeli airstrike had targeted the power plant near Zibnin, but the Embassy later received unconfirmed eyewitness reports that the plant had not been damaged. At approximately 1130 local, a significant amount of celebratory gunfire was heard in the Shia-dominated southern suburbs of Beirut.

ISRAELI INCURSION OVERSTATED

14. (C) Throughout the afternoon, UNIFIL continued to observe small arms exchanges across the Blue Line near Rmaich, as well as Israeli overflights, artillery fire, and airstrikes. UNIFIL did not, however, observe Israeli ground forces entering Lebanese territory, as widely reported in the press. The only Israeli ground element sighted was a single tank that may or may not have crossed the Blue Line, but advanced no farther. UNIFIL saw it strike a landmine, which halted it at or just a few meters over the Blue Line. Nasr commented that this incident may be the "destroyed tank" Hizballah is boasting about on Al Manar television. He also theorized that the lone tank may be the basis for all the apocryphal news headlines of an Israeli invasion of south Lebanon. There were also reports that an Israeli gunboat had shelled a target north of Naqoura, but UNIFIL could not confirm it.

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15. (C) As of 1600 local, Nasr told emboff that Israel was continuing its airstrikes and had hit another (unidentified) bridge in southern Lebanon. There was a second report of an Israeli gunboat off the coast, but UNIFIL again could not confirm it. In addition, Nasr reported there were still no UNIFIL observation of Israeli ground troops in Lebanon. He said that Israel had not contacted UNIFIL for mediation; however, he indicated Hizballah had begun to convey feelers for a cease-fire.

16. (U) A formal Cabinet session to discuss the fighting in the south was called by PM Siniora at 1700 local. Also at 1700 local, Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah held a press conference, in which he justified the abductions as the "right of the resistance."

COMMENT

17. (C) This provocative Hizballah action is at odds with what Nasrallah had promised the participants of the National Dialogue on June 29. It also contradicts the conventional wisdom that Hizballah would not threaten Lebanon's stability during the economically crucial summer tourist season. In his news conference, Nasrallah addressed this deception, by declaring that Hizballah would "never give up the opportunity" to seize Israeli prisoners. End comment.
FELTMAN